AGONY OF THE COCK AND THE HEN

Laxmi Narain Garg

Illustrations : Viky Arya

For children of the age group 10-12 years

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Once upon a time, there was a village called Tablapur and in that, lived a cock and a hen. Both were good friends. They always moved and frolicked together. The villagers never saw one without the other.

One day, the cock and the hen were playing near the river bank. After a while, the cock felt thirsty and decided to take a sip of water from the river. The hen too was thirsty but she was afraid to go near the river. So she stayed back. The cock dipped its beak inside the river. A big sip of water refreshed his parched throat. He went for another sip, then another and then one more. Just then the cock noticed something in the water.

"Hey, come here and look! What's that?" he cried as he continued to look into the river.

The hen was taken aback by the sudden yell of the cock. Afraid to come near the river, she maintained a safe distance and asked anxiously, "Why, what is it? I wouldn't come nearer."

The cock ignored her anxiety and kept looking as if there was something in the water that he had never seen before. The cock wavered his head a couple of times and looked at the hen.

Suddenly something prompted him and he started walking towards the hen. He came very near and then gazed over the hen's head in surprise. Then he rolled his eyes upwards as if trying to see his own head.

"What is the matter?" the hen asked. "Ever since you had a sip of water from that river, you have been behaving strangely. I wonder if that water has cast some kind of a magic spell on you!"

"Ha! Ha!" the cock laughed and said, "You are right! The water in that river showed me today who I really am." Having said that, the cock began to strut with pride.

"What do you mean by who you are?" the hen was confused as she looked at the cock, "...and why are you strutting?"

The cock replied, "Well, it was only today that I saw a crown on my head. Had I not gone near the river, I would never have seen my reflection. Since I have a crown, I can flaunt it. It makes me feel special and thus I strut. And now I see why people give me so much respect. It's all because of my crown!"

The hen got a little envious as she heard the cock brag about his crown. She said, "You are mistaken. Nobody looks at your crown. People are interested in your delicious meat!" Upon hearing this, the cock got peeved. He shrugged and said, "That's sarcastic! It's just that you are envious of my beautiful crown. What can I do if God has not given you anything to flaunt?"

"Ha! Ha!" the hen laughed. "No wonder your crown is attractive.

However, it doesn't help you save your life. Does it? And look at me! I don't have a crown like you, neither do I have anything to be proud of, but would you agree that I am much more useful?"

"What do you mean, you are more useful?" the cock asked with surprise.

"Nobody catches me for meat because I lay eggs," the hen boasted. "This makes me more useful than you and that's why I am being taken care of."

The cock realised he was on the verge of losing the argument. He thought for a while and then quickly retorted, "I agree that people need you for eggs but don't be delusional. They don't love you. They are selfish. I think you are not aware how they ridicule you behind your back."

"Why, what do they say?" the hen suddenly became curious. The cock replied with a grin," The other day I was passing by a meat shop when I heard two men standing there.

One of them said, 'Hen is a funny creature. Since time immemorial, we have been eating eggs and we still don't know whether it was the hen or the egg that came first!' and the other man replied, 'Why should we break our heads discussing as to what came first. We know that egg is delicious and so is the hen!' Then they both laughed and walked away."

"Hmm...!" the hen gave out a loud sigh.

"I know people keep talking about this.

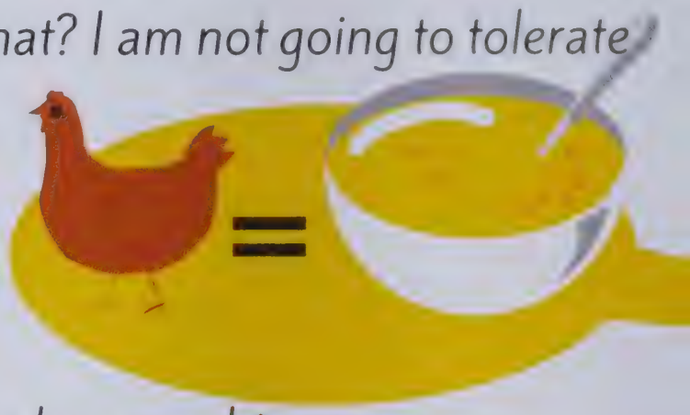
I may be a little funny yet I am glad I am not as rude and ungrateful as man."

A sense of relief dawned upon the cock as he noticed despondency rising in the hen. He did not stop there and said further, "You are absolutely right! Man is very ungrateful. Once I also heard something very distasteful which they say about you."

"Now what?" the hen asked in a dejected tone.

"Man has coined a very strange comparison," the cock replied. "I heard him say, 'ghar ki murgi daal baraabar!' (self possession is quite undermined). Now tell me, how could one compare you with a bead of pulse?"

"Oh!" the hen squeaked. "How could they say that? I am not going to tolerate this anymore. I shall leave this village soon. It is only then man would realise my importance."



The cock was happy that he had outwitted the hen. He fluttered his wings, swayed his head a little to make sure that the hen saw his crown.

Then he said, "Leave it! We know that man is ungrateful. So let's not be bothered. Two foolish men comparing you to a bead of pulse would not turn you into one. So don't worry and enjoy life!"

Having said this, the cock strutted with a rapid pace and disappeared into the bushes leaving the troubled hen in a myriad of thoughts. The hen was not happy with the cock's indifference towards her agony. Yet she kept quiet. The cock and the hen did not meet for a few weeks.

Then one day, the hen again saw the cock walking slowly along the village road. His usual strut has disappeared and he walked with his head hung.

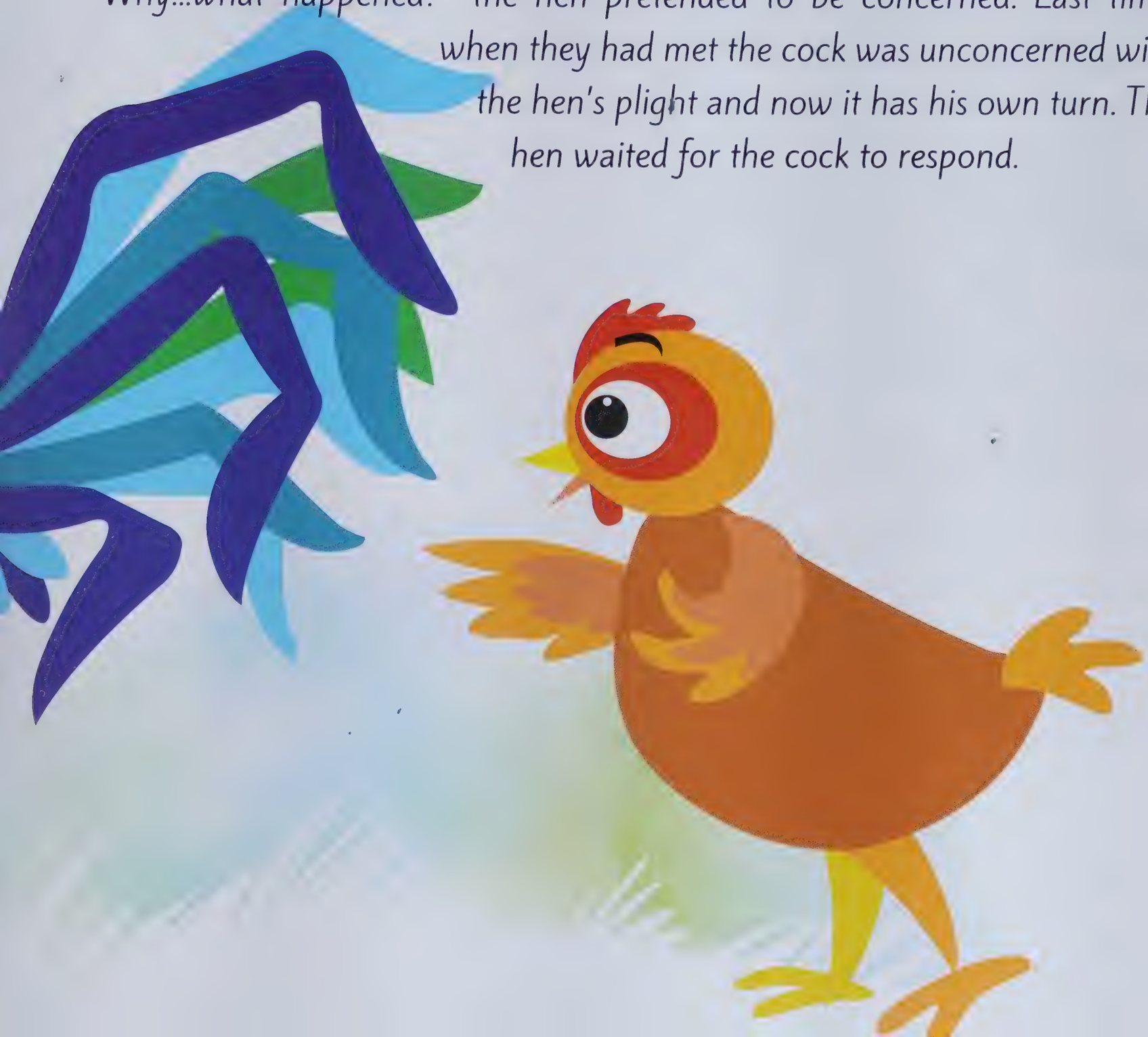
The hen took a few quick steps to catch up the cock. She asked, "Hey! Why are you looking so sad? And what happened to your strut?" Then she looked over the cock's head and quipped, "I hope your crown is intact!"

The cock was not in a happy mood. He ignored the hen's comment and kept walking. "What's wrong with you?" the hen asked again.

"Everything!" the cock replied dejectedly.

"Noting seems right. Man is an extremely wretched creature. Earlier he used to make fun by comparing you with beads of pulses and now it is me who he has begun to ridicule."

"Why...what happened?" the hen pretended to be concerned. Last time, when they had met the cock was unconcerned with the hen's plight and now it has his own turn. The hen waited for the cock to respond.



The cock sighed loudly and said, "The other day, a little before the sunrise, I was taking a stroll in the nearby park. It surprised me to see, although I was yet to crow, some people were already there in the park. I wondered how they got up before my crowing. Just then, I crowed loudly... Cookdooo...cooo...and with that, the Sun came up!"

"That's good!" the hen said. "So, why are you sad?"

The cock continued, "As I crowed louder, the man passing by looked at me and said to his friend walking alongside, "Look at him we are in the twenty-first century and he still thinks if he doesn't crow, the day wouldn't break. What a foolish creature!"

The hen asked, "What did the other man say?"

"Nothing, he simply jeered and went away saying that man doesn't need cocks anymore," the cock concluded. "But I don't know what could be the reason? Until I crow, how do men get to know about the day-break?"

...Cooo...

The hen understood the entire situation. She remembered how the cock behaved nonchalantly last time. Though the hen wanted to pay him back in the same way, she desisted from doing so. Instead, she said, "I know the reason why man doesn't need you to crow now."

"What is the reason?" the cock asked in an excited tone.

The hen replied, "Look, there was a time when people thought your crowing was related to sunrise. But man, now has got several electronic gadgets such as alarm clocks and mobile phones that ring or buzz at a set time. So he is no more dependent on the cock-a-doodle-doo, as you possibly think."

It was now time for the cock to brood. As terrible thoughts about the futility of his own existence dawned upon his crowned head, the cock said, "My dear hen, I guess we had had enough of this nonsense. You were right. Man is not only selfish and ungrateful but also uncultured and immodest. I have decided to leave this place at once. Will you come with me?"

"I wanted to go right away when you told me how poorly man thinks of me. Let us go and leave Tablapur right away. I am sure after I leave, there would be scarcity of eggs. Then people of Tablapur would realise what wrong have they done to me!"

"I totally agree with you," the cock nodded. "A day would come when all alarm clocks would stop working and mobile phones would not buzz. With me gone, there would be no sunrise and the entire Tablapur would remain blanketed by darkness. Then man would know that I, through my 'cock-a-doodle-doo' invoke the Sun. Likewise, cuckoos and peacocks entice the clouds to cause rains. Every creature serves a definite purpose in the larger scheme of Nature."

Finally, the agony in their hearts caused the cock and the hen to leave the village with a sense of certainty that long after they were gone, life in Tablapur would never be the same again.

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There lived a cock and a hen in a village named Tablapur. While the cock loved to flaunt his crown and boast about his amazing cock-a-doodle-doo that used to be an indispensable alarm clock for the villagers, the hen was full of conceit for her unique ability to lay eggs. Then one day suddenly their lives became miserable. What was the cause of their agony? Read on to find out…

Laxmi Narain Garg is an acclaimed Hindi novelist and a proficient translator with around twenty published books. He is also a renowned lexicographer who has edited three dictionaries. *Shikhandi* and *Katha ke Nupur* are his recently published books.

Viky Arya is a poet, sculptor, illustrator, lyricist, writer and advertising professional. She is also a specialist in social communication and a national award winner for children's literature. Her large portfolio of diverse artwork spans several styles.

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